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Contra veritat escriure, nom par sie loor

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CONTRA VERITAT ESCRIURE, NO·M PAR SIE
LOOR'

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To Lola Badia

It is with these words that Apollo reprimands Homer in *Curial e Güelfa*. This reproach made in such an illustrious surrounding is rather unusual in the Middle Ages. It occurs in Curial's first mythological dream where, as a new Paris in a new trial – in a sublime scene, therefore – he will formulate his literary dictum in accordance with the view of the great god of Olympus.²

We should not be scandalized by the author's putting Homer in second place and that he should feel inclined for Dictys and Dares – who esteemed Hector over Achilles –, if they represented what was then the historical criterion and if it were a matter of discerning «which of these writings is the more truthful» (217).^{3,4} In spite of Homer's high style, Curial sanctions him with this lapidary sentence:

«Homer wrote a book which I direct must be held in great esteem among men of learning: Dictys and Dares wrote the truth. This is my verdict» (219).⁵

¹ To write contrary to the truth is not, I think, to praise» (218). All textual citations from *Curial and Güelfa* have been taken from Pamela Waley's English translation (London: Allen and Unwin, 1982).

² See a summary and an interpretation of the scene in Lola Badia's *De la reverenda letradura en el «Curial e Güelfa»*, «Caplletra» 2, p. 15.

³ We will follow Aramon i Serra's three volume edition (Barcelona: Edicions Barcino, 1930-33).

⁴ «qual scriptura de aquestes és pus vertadera» (3:86.24).

⁵ «Homero ha escrit libre que entre los hòmens de sciència man que sie tingut en gran estima; Dites e Dares scriviren la veritat, e axí, ho pronuncie» (3:91.2-5).

Not only is the scene impressive in the novel and one that deciphers events from the previous volume,¹ but it is also a high point with regard to rhetoric. *Curial's* author attacks the literary deformation of truth decidedly and daringly.² Let's take a closer look. At Parnassus itself Homer is being criticized for having written more for his own glory than for reflecting truth, simulating events that never took place, that is, showing off his own style at the expense of altering reality. This was not Apollo's purpose when he doted Homer with his talent.³

We also observe that the reason why the God recriminates the great Greek poet is for his having falsified Dido's story. This is a point that particularly irritates the Catalan author since making the Carthaginian woman contemporary to Aeneas («which did not happen and is not true, for Aeneas never saw Dido nor Dido Aeneas, since nearly three hundred years separated one

¹ The fact that Hector is preferred here over Achilles cannot be dealt with separately from the passage in volume 2 where Hector is also passed over. The latter takes place in the Melun tournament episode where Mons. Salisbury is criticized because he has behaved similarly to Achilles, who vanquished Troyol where the enemies were plotting against a single combatant. Although he is allowed to seek victory by all means available – an opinion which is expressed again here: «in battle everyone must seek his own advantage» (219) [«en batalla cascú deu cercar son advantage» (3:91.1-2)] –, that was not chivalrous.

Although the commentary was not quite appropriate since *Curial* had been the winner of the tournament, he took advantage of the situation to criticize an attitude that is hardly noble, that of plotting. He compares the knight to a classical hero Hector who, although losing against Achilles, will, with a different motive in volume 3, be praised yet again. Let's recapitulate: there is a desire to praise a loser and criticize a plotter. (For an interpretation of these events, see my study to be published in 1991 in the «Revista de Literatura Medieval»: *Si Curial fos Alfons IV*).

² Since Boccaccio holds a similar view, we ought to align him in a line of deformation alongside Homer and Virgil; compare the Dido exemplum in *Curial* with the one in book XIV of Boccaccio's *De genealogia deorum gentilium* (On this point, see my paper *Dante y Boccaccio en el «Curial e Güelfa»*, which appears in the 1991 volume of the UNED journal «Epos».

³ Confirm this by looking at III. 88.7-18.

from the other» (218)¹ and then moreover making her unfaithful sentimentally to her dead husband – testified to by St. Jerome whom the author cites as an authority– it is, quite simply, misrepresenting the truth.²

So, what motives does *Curial* itself reveal to us for the seriousness of misrepresenting truth? As an author who belabors artistry, who wields certain notions of rhetoric, how is it that he adopts such a drastic approach?³ Let's try to understand the cause of his indignation, by confining ourselves to the work itself. What motives, then, justify such condemnation in the novel? May an internal analysis clear up the causes?

The answer may lie in the episode of the novel that follows the stopover in Greece. Curial's wreck takes place and then his captivity in Tunis where our hero will have the opportunity to show an exemplary and didactic attitude toward the young Moorish woman Camar. Here we will see how she is reading the *Aeneid* and how the captive explains Virgil to her, which he knows quite well.⁴

According to Virgil's version, which the author knows is incorrect, Camar, the absolutely heroic and innocent character in the novel, exactly like a new Dido,⁵ being rejected by the person she loves, will take her own life. As Bastardas has quite rightly seen, this story «is one of literary suicide, that is, of a suicide that

¹ «la qual cosa no fonch ni és veritat, car Eneas nulls temps viu Dido, ne Dido Eneas, car del un al altre hach prop de trecents anys» (3:89.5-7).

² See 3:89, which is dedicated to this point.

³ According to Lola Badia, in the cited work, «I could not say whether all this is literary syncretism, a polemic against a certain way of understanding «revelenda letadura» or a defense of a certain model of novelistic writing» (p. 18).

⁴ See 3:111.16-25.

⁵ For the Dido-Camar relationship and how the Latin heroine is surpassed by the Catalan one, see the abovementioned article by Badia, pp. 16-18.

might not have taken place without the stimulus that the girl receives from literature».¹

For the author, this fact, a replica of Dido's situation, is inseparable from the previous passage where, –because of Dido– it has been disclosed so adamantly counter to Virgil who, like Homer, had tinged things with the color of lies.

However, our author makes Virgil's version his own. That is, Camar dies aware of and knowing only the distorted version:

«You who swore on the ashes of Sichaeus to be faithful to your husband after his death and then, fleeing for fear of your brother Pygmalion, broke the promise made to the royal ashes for a new love which against all reason grew within you. I am ashamed to have been born in your Carthage because of your inconstancy, of which Virgil wrote» (244).²

The novelist is adamant once again. His indignation speaks here through the mouth of Camar who, to be the model of true virtue, has to play as an anti-Dido:

«You chose to die as one in despair, for whom all remedy had disappeared, unreasonably, in a frenzy so great that you died not knowing what you did. Thus it should not be accounted a virtue to you for you were merely unwilling to hear the shameful word "rejected"; and that alone excuses your wicked severity» (244).³

¹ J. Bastardas, *El suïcidi literari en Camar. Una nota sobre el primer humanisme català en la novel·la «Curial e Güelfa»*, in «Miscel·lània Antoni M^a Badia i Margarit», *Estudis de Llengua i Literatura Catalanes XIV*. Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 1987, p. 262.

² «Tu qui jurist sobre les cendres dels ossos de Siqueo tenir lealtat a ton marit despuys de la sua mort, e après, fugida per pahor de Pigmalion, ton frare, rompist la fe promesa a les reyls cendres per nova amor que en tu contra tota rahó se nodrí! Yo he vergonya ésser nada en la tua Cartago, per rahó de la inconstància que Virgili scriu de tu» (3:149.9-17).

³ «Elegist morir sens alguna rahó, car la furor tua fonch tanta que, on sabent ço que feyes, morist, e per ço no't deu ésser comptat a virtut, sinó solament que no volguist oyr aquell tan vituperable mot de repudiada, e aço solament dóna color a la tua celerada rigor» (3:150.14-20).

Our moralizing author is implacable and concedes to Dido not even the quality of virtue. On the contrary, Camar most certainly will die a victim of virtue, on Cato's model, as he shows in the noble dialogue with her mother.¹ (Shortly afterward, moreover, the Catalan heroine blames the Latin heroine for having acted in a sudden way while she does it after «long and mature deliberation taken by me during many days» (245).² There is no point of comparison, then, with regard to both of their value. However, keep in mind, this recrimination is absolutely unfair. Dido was not guilty of the charges that Camar laid on her and the author has made us see this.

Let's backtrack a little now to understand the novelist's irritation even more. Virgil's responsibility was very great when he had even confused Dante. Homer had already been censured by our author for spreading the evil deed to future writers:

«giving to some what was not theirs and concealing what was publicly known to others. Raising to great heights your wonderful and noble style, you with your pen have caused all the poets who came after you to marvel and to think that things happened as you described them» (218).³

For Dante —most highly respected by our author— had also repeated Virgil's distorted story. Regarding this there is a clear memory of Camar's allocution before she commits suicide:

I, Camar, your daughter, following the footprints of your second bur-

¹ Regarding this dialog —and I excuse myself from citing it again— see *Tres comentaris sobre el «Curial e Güelfa»*, published in the 1991 volume of the «Revista de Filologia Románica».

² «de longa e madura deliberació per mi en molts dies dirigida» (3:150-151).

³ «donant als uns ço que no ere llur, e amagant ço que en los altres públicament fench conegut; e alçant en alt aquell noble e marvellós estil, ab la ploma has fet maravellar tots los poetes qui après tu són venguts, e pensen que los fets axí, com tu has escrit foren passats» (3:88.18-24).

ning passion, shall come to serve you in the unknown realm, for it is not right that so noble a queen should wander alone among souls born of noble blood» (244).¹

Recall that in the *Divine Comedy* Dido is situated in the second circle of Hell where she is being purged of the sin of lust, along with Semiramis, Cleopatra, and Helen; still and all, she is the only one who commits suicide:

«L'altra è colei che s'ancise amorosa,
e ruppe fede al cener di Sicheo» (*Inferno*, Canto V, 6162)² [The
next is she who slew herself for love and broke faith to the ashes
of Sichacus!]³

Is it not the case that our author is making an implicit re-proof of Virgil for having confused even Dante? Isn't it quite a serious matter that an exemplary woman such as Dido should be found together with those condemned for lust? Is it not a fact that can horrify such an eminently moralist author who wants his work to be a model of virtue, as the prologue states?

Thus, if the Catalan author criticizes the Virgilian version for its falsity and shortly afterwards this same version is not only criticized by a heroic personage who knows that version and has read it in Virgil, but also plays an influential role in her suicide, it is obvious that he is telling us that the deformation of truth by writers is a very serious issue because it has influence over the actions of those who read it and aboveall because it affects the image of that figure with regard to posterity. He is alerting us to

¹ «Yo, Camar, filla tua, seguint les segones pejades de la tua furor encesa, iré per servir a tu en los regnes innots, car no és rahó que reyna tan noble vage sola entre ànimes nades de clara sanch» (3:149.21-25).

² «L'altra és cella qui s'ausís amorosa, / e perjurà les cendres de Sicheu» (vol. I p. 102; Andreu Febrer's 15th c. Catalan version, edited by A.M. Gallina [Barcelona: Ed. Barcino, 1974]).

³ *The Divine Comedy*. Trans. by Charles Singleton. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971.

the sociological power of books and to the influence of one's reading.

So, then, Dido has become an object of vituperation for the same reason for which she was to be extolled. And not because Virgil left her ill-treated but rather because he distorted her virtue. Because he created the confusion. Because he was concerned more for the beauty of the narrative than for its authenticity. And the lack of respect for truth leads to the lessening of the merit of the personality about whom is being written. Although praise may be intended, should the facts not be transmitted with authenticity, a loss of virtue ensues, not to mention an annoying misunderstanding.

He, as a writer, rejects adulation and seeks exactitude. It is also the pose of his beloved Hector:

«I have never wished for vain praise, and now less than ever do I wish it. Let those who deserve it receive it, for I renounce it utterly» (218).¹

This is an attitude that contrasts with the pomp with which Homer addresses Achilles when he appeals to him for help for having contributed to stimulate his fame. With a single initial sentence our very skillful author succinctly ridiculizes the laudatory style:

«Oh, you who were king and lord of the greatest kingdom in Greece, the flower and light of chivalry!» (215).²

He, as a writer, exposes to us a very real figure, quite human, with a sincere mixture of defects and qualities. As a knight he is a man of great valor, who fought with courage when several knights plotted against him, but he was not a great conqueror or

¹ «Yo null temps fuy desijós de vana loor, e ara menys que jamás; e aquells qui la desigen, hagen-la, que yo de tot en tot hi renunciu» (3:87.22-25).

² «O, rey e senyor que fuist del major regne de Grècia, flor e lum de cavalleria» (3:81.21-22).

warrior—as he clarifies at the beginning of the third volume (3:13.13-25)—. More specifically, some very dark deeds are explained to us in this volume, such as when he was surrounded in a naval encounter and was imprisoned. He will only triumph and be a model of amorous behavior after purging himself of the sin of ingratitude, repenting and mending his ways. No more realism can be had.

Now then, what about accuracy? That is, is all of this calculated, all of this firm and valiant rhetorical declaration, only to draw a fictitious character in a well defined and highlighted manner? He cannot defend literary realism if he does not criticize the great classics for not being very realist. He condemns them for not writing with veracity. It does not matter that Dido was realist but rather that her story was true. I believe we have every right to question how it is that the authenticity of the facts bothers a novelist so much if he only deals with non-authentic events. For how can he maintain his stance with so much character if he does not apply it completely, if the novel is intranscendental from the point of view of historicity? If his characters are only fictional, how can they be a true model of behavior? Doesn't this aspect invite us to look for a double reading in *Curial*?¹

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(Translated by Albert M. Muth)

¹ The questions raised here remain open. However, I have already advanced an answer in *La «Comedieta de Ponça» i el «Curial e Güelfa» frente a frente*, which will be published in the «Revista de Filología Española».